Westminster Lectures

MYSTICISM

BY THE

REV. R. H. BENSON, M.A.

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(THIRD SERIES)

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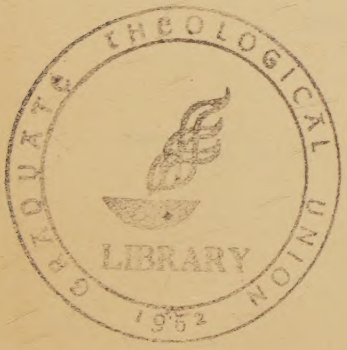

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PREFACE

It is impossible, of course, within the limits of this lecture, even to mention by name many of that great body of Mystics who at various times have been lights in the Catholic Church. A sketch even of German Mysticism alone would occupy more space than is at my disposal. All that I have attempted to do is to indicate the relation of Mysticism to dogmatism, to show that the Church has always recognised them as correlatives rather than irreconcilables, and finally, to point out what seems to me a kind of ready reckoner, which may usefully be applied for the determination of a Mystic's position among his fellows.

I have added a few footnotes and references, but, purposely, very few, since these, for the most part, tend to confuse rather than to illuminate; and those extracts that I have selected are put forward as containing the

general point of which the passage treats rather than as inclusive of all that the author has said on the subject. No doubt they could be qualified to some extent by other passages from the same writer.

In the books recommended at the end, I have chosen biographies and works of the Mystics themselves, rather than commentaries upon them, in the hope that those who wish to pursue the subject will go straight to the original stream, rather than to reservoirs; but I have added one volume on the English mystics which may be read with profit, but it must be remembered that the author is not a Catholic.

MYSTICISM

Of all phases in religious thought that at the present day are attracting attention, none is more prominent than that of Mysticism. It is a subject that is engrossing widely differing minds of every variety of creed, Christian and non-Christian; we hear of Mahatmas in London who profess to reveal The Way; we read lives of Catholic contemplatives written by Presbyterian ministers; there are numerous societies, Theosophical and Buddhistic, formed for this study; and among many there seems more and more a growing conviction that the road to the restoration of broken unity lies along these lines. Many of these groups indeed are contemptible; but many are not; the movement is associated with sincerity and a genuine desire to attain to truth, and the value of this fact is scarcely diminished by the folly of those

Many "Mystics"

who lead the world to think that Mystics are no more than picturesque dreamers who wear long hair and talk nonsense, and that their system is one which, professing to transcend reason, only succeeds in contradicting it.

Catholic Mysticism

It seems suitable, then, that at such a time as this, something should be said of that strain of mystical thought which has always found a place in the Catholic Church, and of the great saints who represent it; for it must be remembered that while on the one side Mysticism has been caustically described as the "fog in which heresy conceals itself," on the other the Church has always recognised its value, and has raised to her altars those who have been eminent in its study and practice. It is remarkable, in fact, that that body which in the world's opinion stands for formalism and ceremonial should unfalteringly hold up the contemplative life as the highest known to man, and should, as her one exception, allow those of her children who have embraced the active life to forsake it, however solemn their vows, in exchange for that higher vocation of retirement and prayer in which, as even non-Catholics admit, the proper atmosphere of mystical thought is to

be found. Right down through the ages shines out this line of saints and sages, honoured above all by the Mother of Saints, —men and women who have produced no books, preached no sermons, and accomplished no external works, but whose explorations into the spiritual world, whose silent acts of purgation, illumination, and union have been accounted by Her who lives in both worlds as the highest achievements attained by human souls.

Purgation—Illumination—Union

Let us, then, consider this subject for a little in a few of its more elementary aspects; and first let us try to understand the place it occupies in the Divine economy of Truth.

I. As we look out at the world about us, we are bewildered by its complexity, and yet what each sees of it is only a very limited superficies. No two men take exactly the same view of what all agree is an objective and united whole. The stockbroker, the poet, the soldier, and the divine —each, as we say, lives in a world of his own. An incident takes place—a war, let us say, breaks out—an incident which, superficially

Complex Views

considered, is a certain limited event, capable of chronicle, beginning and ending at certain moments. Yet we begin to perceive something of its complexity when we consider its effect upon various classes of people. The stock-broker buys and sells stock according to circumstances, the poet composes a martial and patriotic ode, the soldier joins his regiment, and the divine falls to prayer. The incident is one and the same, it arises from a certain cause, it involves the exchange of certain papers, it is, in one sense, a very simple thing, and yet its significance is almost infinitely various.

Or consider an even more simple object of thought—for example, a field in spring-time.

The Point of View

There is a fable of three men who stood looking at it, leaning on the same gate at the same time—a geologist, a farmer, and a poet. Each had eyes of equal capacity, each a brain of the same material, and each had the same object of contemplation; yet each was affected by what he saw, in a wholly different plane, and with wholly different results. The geologist saw the tilt of the strata and the hint of a fossil-bed, and went away to add an illustrative footnote to

his great work; the farmer, chewing a straw, detected the productive power of the soil, and that evening made a certain offer for the purchase of the five-acre; the poet saw only the curve and colour of the grasses, composed a sonnet, and published it in the *Westminster Gazette*. Each looking upon the same thing, saw that only for which he looked, and yet none of them was the dupe of his fancy. Another geologist, another farmer, and another poet would have seen and said the same kind of things respectively as our three friends.

Yet, curiously enough, probably each of the three despised the point of view of his companions. The geologist sneered at the grossness of the farmer, and the subjective nonsense of the poet; and the poet wondered how reasonable men could be so blind and insensate.

If we wish, then, to have a comprehensive knowledge of the field (or rather an approximation towards such knowledge), we must not range ourselves with any one of these three, but must consult them all. Not that these three are sufficient; for each is only repre-

Comprehensive Knowledge of a thing in all its aspects

sentative of a class. There are schools of geologists, of farmers and of poets, each one of which, it may be, agrees only with his fellows as to the plane on which he observes and dogmatises. Among farmers there are those who uphold the use of chemical manures, and those who do not; among poets there are to be found both realists and idealists. This, then, enormously increases the complexity of knowledge. It is God only who can see a thing absolutely as it is in all its aspects and relations.

Now apart from such things as fields and wars, there is that aspect of the world which we call religion; there is that inner spirit-world to which all religious instinct bears witness—a world which, in the opinion of all believers in the supernatural, interpenetrates and transcends the world of sense. The degree and manner in which it does so is a matter of opinion, varying with the religion held by the individual thinker. In conventional religion—in the view of those persons who regard their devotion merely as a small and unimportant parenthesis in their lives—it hardly does so at all; there are certain moments when homage must be paid

Religion

to the Divine Ruler, certain ceremonial actions to be performed, but, beyond that, the world is to them very much what it is to the professedly irreligious. In superstitious religion the world of spirit interpenetrates the world of sense to a fantastic degree; there are no indifferent actions; to put on the left shoe before the right may precipitate a catastrophe. And between these two extremes runs the whole gamut of religious thought. The perfect religion (whatever that may be) preserves the true balance of the two worlds; each affects the other according to reason and proportion.

Pre-Christian Religions

In pre-Christian religions it was held that this double aspect of the universe demanded a double treatment. There were those —the vulgar—who could only appreciate the spiritual at its point of contact with the material; they were capable of offering sacrifice to more or less unknown powers, of performing certain ceremonies, and even of understanding certain elementary rules of conduct and thought. But the system presented to these was of a very coarse and materialistic nature.

On the other hand, there were those of finer

mould, capable of going deeper into truth, and of receiving mysteries beyond the spiritual and mental reach of their more stupid brethren. A double system therefore was in use: there was the exoteric department, in which all had a share; there was the esoteric sanctuary of truth, into which initiation was necessary, and which was not suitable except for those capable of understanding it.

Exoteric and Esoteric teaching

We see this most plainly perhaps in Greek religion. Here there was on the one side the ordinary religious life of the people, consisting chiefly of sacrifice and ceremonial, coupled with a little anthropomorphic instruction upon Olympus and the achievements of the gods; and on the other side there was the inner shrine of truth, exemplified in the Eleusinian mysteries, where doctrines were revealed which (if we may believe report) included shadows even of such truths as those of the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the dead. In any case, here was the esoteric department concerning itself with deeper truths than those published to the people, and including (if not actually interpreting in a spiritual sense) a know-

The Greeks

ledge of some of the more profound laws of nature.

In Egyptian religion we find to some degree the same distinction. Priests formed a caste altogether apart, holding knowledge withheld from others, although, in this case, it seems that more was revealed by them to the vulgar than was the case in Greece—the Immortality of the Soul and the Particular Judgement were truths taught to all alike. Yet right through all pre-Christian religions there is to some extent this distinction; according to the degree in which each worshipper was capable of understanding truth, whether on the material or the spiritual side, so was he excluded from or initiated into the doctrines that lay behind the reach of sense.

The Egyptians

Here, therefore, we have the first representative of Mysticism in pre-Christian religions. Both those who taught and those who learned truths hidden from the vulgar, were to a large extent a caste apart: they looked upon the same world as the others, yet saw it differently; they were as the geologist to the poet, or the poet to the farmer: each observed the objective fact, each understood it in his own way.

Then at last, upon a world weary of misrepresentation of the Divine nature, came Christianity.

Christianity

Now it is not my duty to lecture upon the truth of Christianity; I assume that as a fact; and I need do no more here than remark in passing the extraordinary manner in which it met and ratified, while it transcended, the devout guesses of ancient Mysticism, as well as fulfilling, as was to be expected, the anticipatory revelation made by God to the Jewish people. Yet even in this earlier revelation there were, to some extent, the two elements noticeable in pagan religions, and these, roughly speaking, were represented by the priests and the prophets. There was first the external ritual and observances of the Law; there was also the internal significance of these things which, again and again, as the prophets tell us, became obscured by the letter in which it was conveyed. Yet in the Jewish religion the inner truth, lying as it did in the moral rather than the mystical plane, was never by intention confined to a select few; and it was this that Christianity once more promulgated to the world at large.

But it did more than this; it brought out

into the light of day the subjects of even pagan mystical thought. For the first time those things only hinted at to the initiated, and revealed even to them under symbols and images, became visible upon the historical stage. It was as the drawing up of a veil. The groaning of creation, hitherto inarticulate and mysterious, became audible as the cry of a fallen world for redemption; the noise of lustral waters, the strange forms and movements guessed at rather than seen, the lights and the faces full of terror to those who looked on them,—all these things were revealed as real and clear and friendly—far more "real," in fact, than those symbols and images hitherto considered as the embodiment of Truth.

Revelation of the Mysteries

For the first time, then, in history these things became the property of the vulgar as well as the hidden treasure of the mystics, for the very reason that now these mysteries had come forward for enactment upon the historical stage. The Resurrection of the Dead could not be apprehended by the world until the miracle of Easter Day; the instinct for Parthenogenesis could not find its full expression until it did so actually in the

stable of Bethlehem; the sacramental idea, so obvious in all heathen rites, however debased, could not be grasped by the uninitiate until the Incarnate Word of God took bread and wine into His venerable Hands; the sacrifices of the heathen, monstrous as they often were, as well as the emphatically mystical offerings of the Jews, received their ratification to some extent and their fulfilment altogether, when the Immaculate Lamb shed His blood upon the Cross. Even the "demon" of Socrates seemed a fable to his friends, until in fire and wind there fell upon the world the Spirit of Truth to guide souls into all truth, and to abide with them.

Is there, then, room for Mysticism in Christianity?

It would seem, therefore, at first sight that there was no longer a place for Mysticism in the Divine economy. As our Blessed Lord told His disciples, they were to proclaim upon the housetops what had hitherto been told only in the ear; it was the boast of St Paul that his office was to reveal mysteries. That which prophets and kings had desired in vain to see, was now the possession of babes and sucklings. Surely at last, it seems, all things are to be open to all men, now that the supreme and final Revelation has been given!

Yet we must distinguish.

It is true that the veil has been drawn up, that a wide and splendid view has been made visible to the world, and that all men have eyes to see it if they will, yet it does not follow that all see it in the same degree, or that any see it adequately and comprehensively. In itself it is complete; it is strictly a Revelation of which the whole is present, yet those who look upon it realise only gradually all that it means, the correlation of its parts and the significance of its details.

The Subjective Element

Once more, then, we may recur to our fable of the field.

Three great classes of observers have stood and will stand always looking upon the vision that Christianity has disclosed—and the first is that of dogmatic theologians.

In this view of the Divine nature and action there is firstly an element of orderliness and union. Although at the first glance the observer may not perceive how intimately one part of the picture is related to another, yet as he stands and watches, little by little the unity comes home to him. The dogmatic theologian sees, for example, a string of pools, even at the first

"Dogmatic Theologians"

glance, but it is not until he has looked and counted and considered, that he understands that they are seven in number, and united by a stream. From the nature of the soil at his feet he deduces the composition of the mountain in the blue distance. It is his business, then, to observe, to classify, and to deduce; to see sources and connections; to bring the whole view little by little before his direct consciousness; and further, to state what he has learned, in such terms that others less erudite can understand it as he does.

The "Devout"

And next there is the group of the devout—persons of no great learning or insight, incapable it may be of apprehending the whole scheme in scholastic terms, yet endowed with the quick instincts that love alone can give. As the scientist or the pioneer, if he is to be successful, must be filled with a certain ardour; as the lover's dull perceptions are quickened by his passion until he becomes almost the equal of an expert psychologist in discerning the half-hidden thoughts of his beloved; so those devout who cannot "discourse learnedly about the Trinity" or "define contrition," are yet capable of perceiving what others do not, since they love God and hate

sin alike with passion. Where others, looking upon the same vision, hear only the rustle of the wind or the cry of beasts, these lovers of God hear His voice and His footsteps walking in His garden : where others see only a desolate waste, these see His footprints plain across the sand.

And finally, beside the dogmatic theologian and the man of prayer, stands the Mystic, the artist of the spiritual life, as hard to define as the poet or the musician.

The "Mystics"

Now it is true that each of these three men must to some extent possess the qualifications of the others, if he is to become expert even in his own province. The theologian must pray, or he will not understand ; the devout must hold a defined creed, or his prayer will vanish into dreaming ; and the Mystic in the same manner must both understand and love, or he will not see clearly. Yet he has a special gift of his own, and this we may call for the present the Art of Divine Intuition. As the poet sees things invisible to the farmer and the geologist, as he is kindled by a sight of colour and form, unperceived by the others, yet objectively real, so the Mystic, looking upon the same facts,

The Gift of Divine Intuition

whether natural or revealed, as the schoolman and the man of prayer, is aware of certain elements, and even of relations and significances invisible to these. It is true he has his penalties to pay: the Mystic, no less than the artist, is at anyrate at the outset of his career liable to glooms, despondencies, and obscurities of which the others know nothing; he is thought unstable, he is called a visionary, yet these charges are the natural outcome of his temperament; he is reproved, suspected, and even derided when he attempts to express in human language that which necessarily transcends it; further, he has the actual dangers that accompany the increase of responsibility. Unless he responds to the light he receives, and passes from intuition to union, embracing with his will that Cross of Christ which he has discerned uniting heaven and earth and all that is made, he will be in a worse state than he who has not received such endowments. Yet with all this he finds at least some compensation in the very fullness of the vision to which he is admitted. Looking upon nature and revealed dogma, he sees depths in them which others do not; the historical facts of Christianity which the

schoolman classifies, and in whose presence the devout finds material for prayer, glow for him in depth beyond depth of inexpressible beauty and meaning; he sees their correlations and their self-evidences, and believes, not only because he hears, but because to some extent he also sees and handles.

II. We come next to a consideration of the various schools of this great body of thinkers, and this will lead us to understand in some degree how it is that those who claim direct intuition appear at times to vary in the account they give of the objects perceived by them. For it is a fact that they do at anyrate seem to differ—and this fact is used sometimes as an evidence that their visions are subjective and prejudiced, rather than objective and direct. The Indian, it is said, descries Nirvana; the Catholic, the Beatific Vision; and the Protestant, the heaven of his particular sect. Yet persons who advance this argument as conclusive, do not for a similar reason deny the reality of beauty in the world, because of the existence of impressionist and realist schools of art—still less because some artists paint in oils, and others in black and white.

Schools of Mystics

However, the first two facts that we must reflect upon in our consideration concern the being of God Himself, and, indirectly the mode in which the spiritual world exists. This will to some extent give us a clue to the mystery.

The Immanence and Transcendence of God

God, we believe, may be looked upon from two sides: He is *immanent*, and He is *transcendent*.

By God's immanence we mean that in a certain degree He is present in the works of His hands, that all things subsist in Him, that all force is the effect of His energy, and that, accordingly, to some extent the Creator may be known by the study of creation.

The reign of law, the fact of beauty, a system of punishment and reward—all these things may be perceived as elements in God's nature, since there are such things as tides, sunsets, poison, and food.

But God is also transcendent; and by this we mean that the Creator is infinitely beyond the creature. Not only is He more than the sum of what He has made, but He exists in a mode utterly different from that in which all else exists. He is not only the First, but He is the Unique. No word, epithet, or verb

can be applied to Him or His action in precisely the same sense in which it is applied to ourselves or our actions. And it follows, therefore, that He cannot be absolutely known, adequately and completely.[1]

Now either of these two truths, if taken separately, leads to error.

Immanence is a truth, but if we regard it

[1] It may be asked in this connection, How, if God is of this nature and exists in this mode so utterly different from that of His creatures, can that nature and mode be even perceived to be true of Him by those creatures? Certainly, say these opponents, such things may be true of God, but since, from the very statement of the case, it is impossible for us to apprehend them, how can we be in any way certain of them? Further, if we think that we perceive them by spiritual faculties, does not that prove that God's nature is not utterly different from our own, since its perception, however faintly, is within our range.

These are too intricate and far-reaching questions to be answered here. But, briefly, one direction along which the answer seems to lie is as follows:—There are two indisputable facts as regards human aspiration—one that it exists, the other that it never absolutely attains. The soul of the saint is at least as much athirst for God as the soul of the beginner. Aspiration towards God has been a continual experience of the human race, except where it has been deliberately stifled; yet aspiration grows more intense as it aspires. Attainment, in every branch of activity, is notoriously unsatisfying. These two lines, then, obviously never have yet in the experience of man found a meeting point; yet they are continually approaching one to the other. It seems, then, a probable conclusion

as the sole truth, we are led to that *impasse* known as Materialism. It is, indeed, a temptation to many souls to set out upon this path. When we consider the astounding intricacy and beauty of this world, its age, its vigour, and its perennial youth; when we

A strong view of Immanence leads to Materialism

that they cannot meet except at a point infinitely beyond the range of human experience; and this probable conclusion, when applied to the intricacies of human consciousness, has a remarkable success in solving them. Further, it may be pointed out that a man's "reach always exceeds his grasp"; that he may be conscious of a fact that he cannot master: he may perceive the nature of God in some degree by direct apprehension without in that act degrading God's nature to his own. This, as a matter of experience, is found to be true in practically every range of life. In art, in morals, and in other sciences, the soul is continually aware of the "relative," because, it would seem, he has a certain consciousness of the fact of the "absolute," a certain apprehension of a standard which he has never been able to formulate to himself. These phenomena, even logically considered, appear to point to an existence which is in relations with creation, but which also infinitely transcends it. So St Thomas Aquinas writes of the soul's consciousness of God: "With regard to God, we could not know whether He exists, unless we somehow knew what He is, even though in a confused manner."[1]

These considerations, however, are quite apart from the further point as to whether God has not actually revealed the fact of His own Transcendence.

[1] *In Lib. Boetii de Trin.*, Opp. ed. Veneta altera, Vol. VIII., p. 342*a*.

see the upward development so plainly visible in art and science; when we take into account the marvellous moral beauty of man's inner nature, and its power of subduing physical forces to itself; and when, following out the thought of growth that science has made familiar to us, we prolong all these lines, century after century, ever in an upward direction, and conceive of the whole under the aspect of a Being working itself out to perfection—what wonder is it that many minds, viewing this astounding Image, fall down before it in adoration and love, and cry that for the first time they have found their God? This, then, is Pantheism, but its end is certain. If we allow ourselves to believe that creation is the limit of Him who made it, sooner or later we shall acknowledge that it is His origin also; and we are forced back, if we accept what some scientists would have us believe, that the beetle has as much right to be called God as a superhuman man; that sea-slime is not only divinely made, but is divine in itself; and that all things, including a mother's love and a philosopher's discovery, have their origin in matter, and their end in physical death. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be.

On the other side the truth of transcendence, taken by itself, leads us to a similar contradiction of instinct, and to this also, for some souls, there is no less a temptation. When we consider the limitations of nature, how that a man's "reach always exceeds his grasp," how that the matter in which he dwells and with which he is surrounded is perpetually dragging down and degrading the aspiration which he knows to be its superior; how his love generates hope, and hope faith, and how again and again his love once more steps in to ratify his intuitions and guesses—we are tempted sometimes to revolt against nature altogether, to despise the material creation as something either evil or non-existent—(and the history of heresy from the Gnostics to the Christian scientists abundantly illustrates the point)—we are tempted to seek God only in an escape from all that He has made.

A wrong view of Transcendence leads to forms of Gnosticism

This tendency, no less than that of Materialism, surely lies at the root of much of the present irreligion. While shallow souls, drowned in the world of sense, gradually lose consciousness of all religious sense, and formulate their experiences in the gospel of Material-

ism, tracing back even the highest aspirations of human nature to one of two instincts—the Propagation and the Sustentation of Life—other souls, only a little less shallow, and fully as one-sided, perceiving that the activities of God are not God, and that the creature is always inadequate to the Creator, come to the opinion that God is wholly apart from the creature. They see that labels are only labels, and hastily conclude, by a remarkable logic, that they are misleading, and, in fact, not genuine labels at all. Hence we hear talk of those who are "above creeds and churches," who "worship God in the open air," who repudiate "dogma." They conclude that because scholastic theology is not identical with personal religion, therefore it has no connection with it. It would be as sensible to argue that since horticulture is not the same thing as art, therefore it has nothing to do with flowers. Roughly speaking, then, these two classes, materialists and undenominationalists, divide between them the irreligious world of to-day; and each, we have seen, takes its origin from a one-sided rather than a false view of God. One sees His Immanence, the other His Transcendence; but neither sees both.

Christianity, on the other hand, holds both these truths, and finds their reconciling in the Incarnation of the Son of God. In this doctrine we see the reasonable relations of Spirit and matter, of the creature and the Creator. God is transcendent; He is above all creation and beyond it; He is in His essence apart from it. Yet He made it, and keeps it in intimate union with Himself. More than that, the process which started into being with the creation of all things has been raised, in one instance, to a new form of union, which is indeed of amazing wonder, and yet, considered in the supernatural order, of equally amazing congruity.[1] God, who transcends the creation in which He is causally immanent, has completed and crowned that immanence by the wondrous assumption of a created human nature into personal union with Himself. This is the doctrine of the Incarnation. "God is a Spirit": "The Word was made flesh." And from this in turn flows out with absolute inevitability, the sacramental system of the Catholic Church.

Truth of both found in Christianity

Now all this seems a digression; yet it is

[1] *Cf. Summa Theologica*, III. i. 1; *contra Gentes*, iv. 54.

a digression necessary for the development of our theme. Here are the two truths about God, each necessary to the comprehending of the other; and each of them representing, as it seems to me, the two great classes in which Mysticism groups itself.

Those whom we may call the "Immanence-Mystics" seem to have been prominent in Greece and Egypt in pre-Christian days. These were they who sought to know God through His works; they perceived clearly enough the Divine energy working under aspects of nature, but, knowing nothing of transcendence, they mistook the Divine energy for Divinity itself. Under symbols of natural life, they adored nature. Of this kind the Eleusinian Mystics seem to have been; it was the yearly resurrection of spring, itself truly a symbol of immortality, that they believed to be the secret of God; in the principles of reproduction and generation they thought they had found the continuity of His life; and in this line of thought, as we have observed, we see error, indeed, yet an error of omission and one-sidedness, rather than one of actual falsehood. The Greeks, with the exception perhaps of those who

"Immanence-Mystics"

thought along Platonic lines, recognised the Divine finger, and even the Divine energy in nature; and, since they were ignorant of God's transcendence, mistook His action for Himself.

Since, then, all minds, even apart from the religion held by them, have affinity with one or other of these truths about God—as, for example, one expert in prayer will find his highest achievements in contemplation, and another in the written liturgy of the Church, though both, if they are wise, will hasten to supplement their respective defects—so even among the Christian Mystics we shall observe the same tendencies.

There are some who think of God under mental images, who, recognising that He has expressed the profoundest laws of His Being in terms of time and space, rightly represent Him to themselves under those same terms; and among these we may place such a Mystic as St Teresa. It was not that she did not perfectly know the truth of God's transcendence—(it is foolish even to assert that)—but that her mind being one of intense vividness and visualising power, and her desire chiefly to impart to others what she herself received, she sought always to

St Teresa

"Visualising" God

describe her intuitions in phrases of light and sound and form. Thus she compares the Godhead to a globe; she uses terms of marriage to express the way of union; she seeks always to reduce her apprehensions of transcendence to images of immanence.

So, too, Mother Julian of Norwich sees the Lord of evil under the image of a lean, foxy young man; so Von Eckhartshausen, describing the Communion of Saints, does so under terms that can only properly be applied to the Catholic Church; it has a chair, he tells us, a supreme pastor, and certain methods of study. Finally, St Francis of Sales, the easiest perhaps of all the Mystics to understand directly, can scarcely speak even of the spiritual aspirations and resolutions of the soul except under an image of flowers gathered and bound into a nosegay for the acceptance of the Beloved.

St Francis of Sales

All these, then, with many others—and they are those who will always be the most popular, may be classed under the name of Immanence-Mystics. While holding firmly to the Catholic doctrine of God's transcendence, it is more natural to them to seek to describe the mysteries even of this under terms of the opposite truth.

Then, on the other hand, there is that school to whom it is natural to merge their view of immanence in the overwhelming light of transcendence; and these find their first exponents in early Gnosticism. "Matter is comparatively unimportant," these tell us; "the works of God are not to be compared with God as He is in Himself."

"Transcendence-Mystics"

Here, again, is a true principle, so far as it goes. It only leads to error when it is emphasised to the exclusion of its correlative truth. It is true that when the claims of matter and spirit appear to clash, it is the former that must yield to the latter, since matter is the expression of spirit, not spirit of matter; it is true that God as He is, infinitely transcends all that He does. The Gnostics, therefore, like the Greeks, suffered through omission rather than positive falsehood.

They perceived that matter was inferior to spirit, that it hindered spirit under certain circumstances, and they came to the conclusion that spirit was essentially free of matter, and that material actions and things were its enemy. Hence they either drove matter from its proper servitude to spirit—thereby losing sight of the fact that the Word was made flesh

— they plunged into wild asceticism and even suicide: or they affected to despise matter, and plunged, still more ignobly, into vice. While holding, therefore, to the principle of God's transcendence, they ignored the equally important principle of His immanence.

And just as the school of Immanence-Mystics had its dunces and its scholars, so too with what we may call the Transcendence-Mystics. There are to be found among them those whose natural vocation it is to insist upon God's transcendence, Catholic saints as well as heretical perverters of the whole: and supreme among these saints stands up St John of the Cross.

St John of the Cross

It would be foolish of me to attempt an exposition of the system of this prince of contemplatives; but very briefly it may be said that in his desire to grasp and to make known the transcendence of God, he could not bear to rest for more than an instant on any image which he knew so well to be inadequate to that for which it stood. He was for ever freeing himself, shaking himself loose of anything but the highest reality apprehended by him. He is as a man for whom the law of gravitation is

all but suspended; he passes up and up into the high air in which all other creatures but those who share his supreme faculty find themselves giddy and bewildered. Again—it is foolishly unnecessary to say that he understood the immanence of God—he insists upon the use of the Sacraments, which, if we may say so, while not identical with the truths of immanence yet are congruous to them; he tells us, as the Church tells us, to use statues and sanctuaries in our devotion, but he warns us that those who would rise high in the mystical life must beware of fettering themselves in a profusion of even sacred possessions; in fact, through all his writings he is for ever soaring above all that is made, with the keen air that lies about the Throne of Him who made it.

The Three Steps

There are the three steps, he tell us, up which all contemplative souls must pass—three nights of darkness and deprivation. The first is that of ordinary detachment, of the abandonment of physical likes and dislikes; the second, of mental detachment from all imaginative thought; and the third, the most profound blackness of all, in which even Divine communications, visions and messages, must be renounced—and there,

"where none appears," he comes to His Beloved.[1]

In later days we have seen the caricature of his system in the schools of the Quietists. Molinos[2] and Madame Guyon seized upon the truth that underlay the thought of St John of the Cross, and misunderstood it, and the evidence that they did so is to be found in the fact that their followers tended to abandon the use of the Sacraments. They perceived, as he did, that God in Himself

Quietists, Molinists

[1] "It is, therefore, supreme ignorance for any one to think that he can ever attain to the high estate of union with God before he casts away from him the desire of natural things, and of supernatural also, so far as it concerns self-love, because the distance between them and that which takes place in the state of pure transformation in God is the very greatest."—(*Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Bk. I., chap. v., 2.)

"When thou dwellest upon anything, thou hast ceased to cast thyself upon the All. Because in order to arrive from all to the All, thou hast to deny thyself wholly in all."—(*Ibid.* xiii. 10.)

[2] "Oh, what a treasure wilt thou find, if thou shalt once fix thy habitation in nothing! And if thou once gettest but snug into the centre of nothing, thou wilt never concern thyself with anything that is without. . . . This is the way of getting to the command of thyself, because perfect and true dominion do only govern in nothing; with the helmet of nothing thou wilt be too hard for strong temptations."—(*The Spiritual Guide*, chap. xx.)

was transcendent of His action; they knew that God was a Spirit, but they seemed to have forgotten (devotionally speaking) that He was also made Flesh. At first sight, perhaps, it appears as if the prayer of quiet, spoken of by St Teresa, resembled that system of devotion recommended by Madame Guyon, yet the difference is vital. While St Teresa never forgot for a moment that the deepest repose in God demands a tense energy of will, Madame Guyon, although certainly she repudiated the accusation, tended to teach that the most intimate entry into relations with God involved an entire relaxation of all the energies of the soul.[1] It was a far more noble mistake than that of the Gnostics, who, despising matter, wallowed in its abuse; yet it has a certain affinity with theirs, and, if produced experimentally far enough along its deflected line, might even one day arrive at the same point.

Briefly, then, we have seen that the two

[1] "It is necessary that in all these operations the soul concur passively. It is true that in the beginning, before it cometh to this, it must be more active; and then, according as the divine operation groweth stronger, the soul must gradually and successively yield and give way unto God, until it be perfectly absorbed in Him." —(*A Method of Prayer*, chap. xxiv.)

truths about God which the Christian religion proclaims to us—His transcendence and His immanence—account to some extent for the apparent variations between the teaching proposed to us by Catholic Mystics. It is not that St Francis holds one doctrine, and St John another; but that each, made as every man must be, in a mould approximating to the side of this or that truth, uses phrases and images which best express his meaning. They both look upon God, they both seek to interpret Him, and they are absolutely at one in what they actually believe about Him.

Diversity of Mystics result of Diversity of view

III. Finally, it is difficult to see how the work of the Mystics is to be safeguarded from error or garnered for posterity, except by the Catholic Church.

We have seen how the Mystics must be to a large extent individualists. It is true that they accept the religion to which they adhere, as an objective system of truth, but their work upon it depends largely on their own efforts and attainments. They do not rest content with a speculative or practical assent to revealed dogma—though

Safeguards of Mysticism

they do give this assent—but they seek to penetrate deeper than others into the formularies that enshrine truth. And we have seen, too, the inevitable tendency of any man who thinks deeply to rest upon one side of truth rather than another. Either he lives more easily in the atmosphere of transcendence than in that of immanence; or he desires to reduce the ineffable to terms of human speech: by nature and temperament he is an Idealist or a Realist.

If, then, there is no external living authority by which his supposed intuitions may be tested, it follows almost inevitably that he will ultimately verge either on the Gnostic position on the one side, or Pantheism on the other; and at the present day especially, in the outburst of "Christian Science" and of the "New Theology," we have excellent illustrations of his double danger. Each of these systems of belief, as has been indicated, is the simple result of following out one truth about God to its logical end, to the exclusion of the other. "Christian scientists" can see nothing but transcendence, the "new theologians" nothing but immanence; and while

External Living Authority

"Christian Science" or "New Theology"

we may welcome the seed of truth that under the zeal of those two parties respectively has burst into such luxuriance in the non-Catholic world, and be thankful that in the result the old heavy Materialism held by the imperceptive of twenty years ago has received what is at the least a serious wound, we cannot help observing that such truths have been confidently and explicitly held for nineteen centuries by the Catholic Church, each balanced by the other, each interpreting its correlative. It may perhaps not be without significance that these two religious movements have taken place simultaneously. For over three hundred years in the Western world a large body of sincere and religious people has been separated from the unity of the Catholic Church; and that Protestant community has from almost the first moment of its existence been splitting indefinitely into further groups and sects, chiefly for local or personal reasons. Now it appears as if once more they were re-uniting on foundations of thought, but this time with the real and fundamental cleavage more visible than ever; they are uniting each on one of the two great truths about God, into two great camps. Is it impossible to hope

that when the process has gone a little farther, many souls at least among them will understand where the reconciliation is to be found, and will turn to that divinely safeguarded Body where both principles have been preserved from the beginning? For it is wonderful how Christian instincts have survived even amongst those who twenty years ago were considered the most dangerous opponents of revealed truth. It used to be considered almost a miracle if a scientist professed Christianity; and now, within the last few days, we have seen a "Catechism," put forward by one of the most eminent scientists of the time, containing statements concerning our Lord and the Christian religion generally, that are, literally taken, hardly distinguishable from the formularies of bodies that unhesitatingly claim to be orthodox.[1]

It is strange, then, that Mysticism and

[1] *The Substance of Faith*, by Sir Oliver Lodge—*e.g.*: "I believe that the Divine Nature is specially revealed to man through Jesus Christ our Lord, who . . . has been worshipped by the Christian Church as the Immortal Son of God, the Saviour of the World. . . . It is our privilege through faithful service to enter into the Life Eternal, the Communion of Saints, and the Peace of God."—Pp. 132, 133.

Scholasticism have ever been thought by the world to be irreconcilable systems, above all, since, as we have seen, the Church has continuously honoured above all her children those who give themselves wholly to the contemplative life. So far from their being irreconcilables, each is in a sense necessary to the other—or, rather, it is within the Catholic fold alone that the two find their true positions. If the dogmatic theologian needs the clear sight of the Mystic for encouragement in his work and for the discernment of truths which, if they are to be practical, must be reduced to form, the Mystic no less needs the dogmatic theologian to warn and correct him when his ardours begin to pass from the objective to the subjective plane. The Mystic, it is true, sees that which to his companion is invisible, or at least of doubtful value; yet that companion on his side holds in an orderly scheme the truths revealed by God on the historical and dogmatic plane, and without the test of these there is no knowing to what wildnesses the seer might not commit himself.

Mysticism and Scholasticism mutually necessary one to the other

And the Church is the Mother of them both: she raises St Thomas as well as St John of the

Cross to her altars, and challenges the world to find a contradiction between them. The geologist does not lose by the intuitions of the poet; the poet is none the worse, but rather the better, for understanding the history of the soil that the geologist can give him.

Above all, it is in the Church and the Church alone that the two great truths about God are presented in apprehensible relations one with another. While she encourages the Mystic with her approval, she teaches by her system of practical devotion as well as by her precepts, that faith and not insight is the foundation of the necessary virtues. Mysticism is in no sense the one path that all her children must tread, although it is that of some of the greatest of her children. Yet all that is necessary she presents to us, under a doctrine which as far transcends all that the Mystic can learn, as God in Himself transcends all that He does. She places before us, in the person of Jesus Christ, Him who at once tabernacles amongst us on the natural plane as well as dwells in the bosom of the Transcendent Deity.

The Incarnation

For in the Incarnate Word of God there is, as we have seen, the perfect union of the two truths under a transfigured

form that calls out our adoration and love, rather than our adequate comprehension. "Have I been so long a time with you, and have you not known me? . . . He that seeth me, seeth the Father also."[1] He who is the "image of the invisible God," is also the "firstborn of every creature. For in Him were all things created. And He is before all; and by Him all things consist."[2] Further, in the sacramental system she pursues the logical continuation of that great central event, and presents to us spiritual gifts under material forms, teaching us that, normally speaking, those gifts actually cannot be obtained except under those forms, and at the same time, that God in His essence infinitely transcends all that He has made and deigns to use. And, above all, in the Sacrament of the Altar, the very centre and sun of her worship, from which all other devotions radiate and to which all aspire, she presents to her children those two immeasurable truths, each of which is necessary to the interpretation of the other, under a form that her smallest child can grasp.

The Sacramental System

Sacrament of the Altar

[1] John xiv. 9. [2] Coloss. i. 15-17.

God is immanent: He is in all that He has made; and under the appearance of the Sacred Host not only is His Godhead present, but there is also present that human nature which He has assumed and united to Himself eternally. God is transcendent; the laws of time and space, compelling to the creature, are in no sense the limits of the Creator. Therefore at one and the same time that Sacred Humanity is in ten thousand places; Christ is born in the House of Bread, dies mystically upon Calvary, and dwells at the Right Hand of the Majesty on high, all in one eternal instant, in virtue of that transcendent life which from all eternity has been His; yet He does so under material appearances.

Here, therefore, before the Blessed Sacrament, kneel with equal adoration and love the Prince of Transcendence, St John of the Cross, and the little one who, though understanding little beyond that within the range of his senses, is at least as dear to God as the wise and the prudent, in whose image and likeness He came down from heaven.

APPENDIX I

QUESTIONS ASKED AT THE CLOSE OF THE LECTURE

Q. Would the lecturer kindly give us a definite statement of what he understands by the word "Mysticism"? What would be a legal definition?

A. A common definition of Mysticism is, "The Art of Divine Intuition." But this does not seem satisfactory, as, coupled with the faculty of insight, is the responsibility of corresponding with it effectually. A better definition, therefore, of Mysticism is, "The Art of Divine Union."

Q. What proof is there that the Mystic's view is more than a subjective one? And if so, how can we check such view with objective fact?

A. One proof is found in the fact that Mystics of widely differing religions agree to a large extent as to the objects of mystical intuition. This has been pointed out in the lecture. The only manner by which such intuitions can be checked is, obviously, by one objective revelation divinely guaranteed—in other words, by the Catholic Church. Apart from that, it does not appear as if there were any test of individual "revelations."

Q. What is the difference between the Catholic practice of Mysticism and the Quietistic doctrine?

A. This is a large question. Very briefly, however, it was taught by the Quietists that the highest exercise of man's faculties in prayer lay in complete passive repose; while Catholic Mystics teach that although there need not be any feverish activity of the intellect or heart in prayer, yet that the attitude of the will must be one of tense effort; and that it is in this attitude of positive adherence to God that the supreme "repose" of the soul is found. It is only fair, however, to add that Madame Guyon at anyrate repudiated the Quietistic interpretation of her teaching.

Q. Have you not rather overstated Sir Oliver Lodge's allegiance to revealed religion?

A. I did not mean that Sir Oliver Lodge professed any real allegiance at all to what is properly known as "Revelation." On the contrary, his line appears to be that truth is found by man's own consciousness raised to the highest pitch, rather than by any actual external revelation from God. But it is at least remarkable that this eminent scientist, approaching Christianity from the purely human side, should use language so nearly approaching orthodoxy. He seems to find, on the human side, a need and instinct for the full Christian truth as proposed to us by the Catholic Church; and this is, at anyrate, a great advance from the old materialistic position of scientists twenty years ago.

Q. Has the Mystic a special "sense," or do all men possess it?

A. All men possess the sense in some degree, just as all men possess the artistic sense. A high cultivation of the mystical sense is, however, no more essential to attaining salvation than is the cultivation of the artistic sense to physical efficiency.

Q. Granting the experience (of a Mystic) to include the sense of personal touch with Deity, what *extra* reference to authority is required, except in behalf of a worn-out convention?

A. This external reference is required, as has already been pointed out, for the correction of individual temperaments. However closely a Mystic may apprehend God, yet he cannot escape from the bias of his own individuality in interpreting that apprehension. He needs, therefore, a continual and divinely guaranteed standard by which he may test his experiences.

Q. Were not the Rosicrucians Mystics? And did they not communicate with the spiritual world? Yet they were not always believers in God.

A. There is, practically, no more impossibility that a man should be in relations with the spiritual world, and yet not believe in God, than that he should be in relations with the material world, and yet not believe. God is in both; yet certain conditions must be fulfilled before He can be recognised explicitly and clearly. I was not aware that any Rosicrucians explicitly disbelieved in God, though no doubt some of them used unfamiliar phrases.

APPENDIX II

The following books may be consulted in connection with the subject of this Lecture :—

Henri Joly.—*The Psychology of the Saints.*

David Lewis.—*Life of St John of the Cross.*

St John of the Cross (Zimmerman).—*The Ascent of Mount Carmel.*

"Saints Series" (ed. by Henry Joly).—*Saint Teresa.*

Henry James Coleridge.—*Life and Letters of Saint Teresa.*

Bevan.—*Three Friends of God* (*Tauler*, *Nicholas of Basle*, *Suso*).

T. F. Knox.—*Life of Suso.*

Walter Hilton (ed. by J. B. Dalgairns).—*Scale of Perfection.*

George Tyrrell.—*Juliana, Anchoret of Norwich.*

Augustin Baker (ed. by Abbot Sweeney).—*Holy Wisdom.*

Von Eckhartshausen.—*The Cloud upon the Sanctuary.*

W. R. Inge.—*Studies of the English Mystics.*

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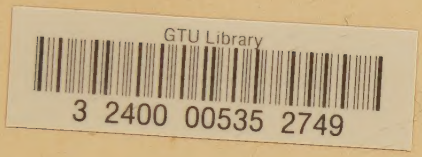

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